

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023*

**Remarks at a White House Screening of "Till"**

*February 16, 2023*

*The President.* Hello, hello, hello. Hello! The House is here!

Well, welcome to the White House, everyone. This is a special, special occasion.

You know, I'd like to start by thanking the Members of Congress who are here. And is Emanuel Cleaver here? I know that Al Green is here, and Jonathan Jackson is here. There you are. I've got you. Okay, now I can see you. Thank you.

I'm honored to host all of you at this special evening during Black History Month for a simple reason: History matters. History matters.

Hi, guys. How are you? Are you all students?

*Audience members.* Yes!

*The President.* Well, good to see you. Welcome to the White House.

*Audience members.* Thank you!

*The President.* Now, remember me when one of you are President, and they say, "Joe Biden is in the waiting room." Don't say, "Joe who?" Okay? *[Laughter]* You'll remember? All right. Anyway, to remember history is to shine a light on the good, the bad, the truth, and who we are as a nation.

And our history shows that while darkness and denialism hide very much, they erase nothing. They can't erase the past, and they shouldn't. Only with truth comes healing and justice and repair and another step forward in the—for that promise we all made, but have never reached: a more perfect Union. But we've never fully given up on it.

That's why we can't just choose to learn what we want to know and what we should we have to learn what we should know. We should know everything about our history. And that's the—great nations do. Great nations. And we're a great nation. And that's why history matters so much. You know, that's why this film matters so much.

You know, it was almost exactly one year ago that I signed a law more than a hundred years in the making. *[Applause]* It was an honor. It was one of the great honors of my career. The Emmett Till Antilynching Act, making lynching a Federal hate crime.

You know, folks, lynching is pure terror, enforcing the lie that not everyone belongs in America and not everyone is created equal. Pure terror to systematically undermine hard-fought civil rights. Innocent men, women, children hung by a noose from trees. Bodies burned, drowned, castrated.

Their crimes? Trying to vote. Trying to go to school. Trying to own a business. Trying to preach the gospel. False accusations of murder, arson, robbery. Lynched for simply being Black, nothing more. With White crowds, White families gathered to celebrate the spectacle, taking pictures of the bodies and mailing them as postcards. Hard to believe, but that's what was done. And some people still want to do that.

You know, as this film powerfully does, it tells the story of a mother's loss and a young son's promise, a nation's reckoning about hate, violence, and power. You know, before 14-year-old Emmett Till left on his trip to visit his family in Mississippi, Ms. Till, a teacher who knew the

history, reminded him: "Be very careful how you speak. Say 'yes, sir,' 'no, ma'am.' Don't hesitate to humble yourself if you have to get down on your knees."

That conversation is not in the distant past. Same talk today. So many Black and Brown family—parents have to have that similar conversation with their children, worrying about whether they'll come home from a walk down the street or playing in the park or just driving their car—like we saw Tyre Nichols, just last month—and becoming a victim in too many acts of hate and violence unleashed on those known and unknown.

Folks, I thought—I got involved in the civil rights movement as a public defender, as my colleagues know, when I was a kid getting out of law school. And I thought you could defeat hate, we—because we passed the Civil Rights Act and so many other things.

But I learned a lesson: Hate never goes away. It just hides under the rocks until it's given a little oxygen by lousy people. And what stops it? Only one thing that stops it is all of us. Silence is complicity. It really is. Silence is complicity. And, folks, we can't remain silent. Denialism is worse, and it's unacceptable.

To the Till family, the civil rights leaders, faith leaders, and so many others gathered here today, as I told many of you at the bill signing last year: Thank you, thank you, thank you for never ever, ever giving up and always—as my mother would say—keeping the faith.

To everyone involved in this film, to paraphrase Maya Angelou: People will never forget how you make them feel. People will never forget how you make them feel. You know, you have that artist's gifts of making us feel our common humanity.

And there is one more hero in this story they have to acknowledge, and it's—a lot of people forget this: the Black press at the time. At the time—[*applause*]. At the time, Jet Magazine, the Chicago Defender, and other Black newspapers were unflinching and brave in sharing the story of Emmett Till and searing it into the Nation's consciousness.

Fearless trailblazers like Ida B. Wells, a brilliant, gifted writer, exposed the barbaric—the barbaric—nature of lynching as a tool to intimidate and subjugate Black Americans. She once said, quote, "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon the wrongs." Turn the light of truth upon the wrongs. That's our charge today; it still exists.

Just imagine Emmett Till standing with us today. Just imagine if he was standing with us today. Maybe he'd be a grandpop, passing down wisdom of the struggle and hope to all the young people here today.

At the start of this new year, I signed the—posthumously awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to Emmett Till and Mrs. Till. Imagine—[*applause*]. No, imagine if we could have done that in person, celebrating their contributions to the American life as a reflection of the dreams that they made possible.

Imagine. And let's continue the work ahead after we imagine that to inspire people of this great nation to reach higher, search for the stars, dig deeper in our souls, to fill the true—the true—and sacred promise of America for all Americans.

And now, from the White House, during Black History Month, it's my honor—and it is a genuine honor—maybe the greatest honor I've had since I've become President—my honor to introduce the film "Till." God love him.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:15 p.m. in the East Room at the White House.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : "Till," White House screening.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Cleaver, Emanuel, II; Green, Alexander N.; Jackson, Jonathan L.

*Subjects:* "Till," White House screening; Black History Month; Civil rights movement; Emmett Till Antilynching Act; Hate-based violence, efforts to combat; Racial equality, improvement efforts; Tennessee, police-involved beating and death in Memphis.

*DCPD Number:* DCPD202300118.